The Underdog

— A Play

J P Das



30

VIKAS LIBRARY OF MODERN INDIAN WRITING

THE UNDERDOG

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

In the Same Series

'Ajneya' (Sachchidananda Vatsyayan): *Islands in the Stream* (A Novel)
Kusum Ansal: *Sing Me No Songs* (A Novel)
Kusum Ansal: *Travelling With a Sunbeam* (A Novel)
Rajendra Awasthy (ed.): *Hindi Short Stories*
Rajendra Awasthy: *The Red Soil*—A Novel
Nirmalprabha Bardoloi (ed.): *Assamese Short Stories*
Saros Cowasjee and Vasant A. Shahane (eds.): *Modern Indian Fiction*
J.P. Das: *The Magic Deer and Other Stories*
J.P. Das (ed.): *Oriya Short Stories*
Shashi Deshpande: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (A Novel)
Raj Gill: *The Torchbearer* (A Novel)
Sarala Jag Mohan (ed.): *Gujarati Short Stories*
Sunita Jain: *Eunuch of Time and Other Stories*
G.D. Khosla: *Never the Twain* (A Novel)
G.S. Khosla (ed.): *Punjabi Short Stories*
Shiv K. Kumar: *Beyond Love and Other Stories*
Shiv K. Kumar (ed.): *Portrait of India* (Short Stories)
Sitakant Mahapatra (ed.): *An Anthology of Modern Oriya Poetry*
Rita Singh Mathur: *Shifting Skies* (Short Stories)
Dina Mehta: *The Other Woman and Other Stories*
Sharf Mukaddam: *When Freedom Came* (A Novel)
Kiran Nagarkar: *Seven Sixes are Forty-three*
Raji Narasimhan: *Drifting to a Dawn* (A Novel)
Nandini Nopany and P. Lal (trs.): *Twenty-four Stories by Premchand*
K. Ayyappa Paniker (ed.): *Malayalam Short Stories*
Bhisham Sahni: *Kites Will Fly* (A Novel)
Maheep Singh: *Who Walks With Me* (A Novel)
Ka Naa Subramanyam (ed.): *Tamil Short Stories*
P. S. Sundaram (tr.): *Poems of Subramania Bharati*
Dolly Thakore: *The Eccentricity Factor* (A Novel)

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

The Underdog
- A Play

J P Das

Translated from the original Oriya by RAVI BASWANI



VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
Regd. Office: 5 Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002
H.O. **Vikas House, 20/4 Industrial Area, Sahibabad 201010**
Distt. Ghaziabad, U.P. (India)

ISBN 0-7069-2582-3

Printed at Kay Kay Printers, 150-D, Kamla Nagar, Delhi-110007 (India)

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

CONTENTS

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

CAST

In Order of Appearance

KUMAR

MEENA

PROFESSOR

BABUJI

RAM/SHYAM

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

When in doubt, recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj or self rule for the hungry millions of our countrymen? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.

M.K. GANDHI

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

ACT ONE

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

(Kumar and Meena in Meena's drawing room. Kumar wants to say something to the indifferent Meena, who is sitting with her eyes closed. After a while, Kumar gathers courage and goes to sit next to her. Before he can say something, Babuji calls out to Meena from inside. Meena exits. Disgusted, Kumar goes back to his original seat and starts munching peanuts.

After a while, Meena returns to her seat. Kumar again tries to speak, but is interrupted this time by the entry of the Professor Kumar returns to his seat.

The Professor is out of breath having climbed up the stairs. He is carrying a walking stick and a notebook in his left hand, and a pen in his right hand. He is about to sit down when Babuji, clad in pajama kurta, enters. They all get up. As soon as they resume their seats the Professor opens his notebook.)

PROFESSOR: On the way here, I came across two people who were ahead of me. They were busy talking. They had probably lost their way. One of them remarked: "When we have got into the street, surely we will find a way out of it." Hearing this, a phrase flashed in my mind: "Life is a stage with one entrance, but many exits." I wondered if it was a quotation from Shakespeare, and if so. . .

BABUJI: We have to forget Shakespeare.

PROFESSOR: (*writing in his notebook*). That's a good slogan.

KUMAR: Like God is dead.

PROFESSOR: (*notes this too, but as soon as he realises its implication. . .*) I don't think I believe in this. But I might use this phrase in one of my plays, in the villain's mouth.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

BABUJI: Writers are tape-recorders, (*Professor notes this down. Babuji goes over and closes his notebook.*) I was referring to you, Professor. Your cliche-ridden writings wouldn't work now.

PROFESSOR: I have completed a new play. I had to spend twelve nights on it.

KUMAR: *Twelfth Night*?

BABUJI: Who have you translated this time?

PROFESSOR: Shakespeare. Who else? *Measure for Measure.*

BABUJI: Shakespeare is dead.

KUMAR: Like God is dead. (*Professor makes to note this, but realises that he has already got this statement down*).

PROFESSOR: No. Shakespeare cannot die .There is a Shakespeare revival everywhere these days. Why, in England itself, since 1946, on an average, fifty plays of Shakespeare are staged every year. I firmly believe that if Shakespeare had been alive today, he would have been one of the most famous personalities of the world.

BABUJI: And why not? He would have been four hundred years' old. Remember the last time when we staged Shakespeare? How many people were there in the audience?

PROFESSOR: We don't have a discriminating audience in the city.

MEENA: We once performed for an audience of only eight. Actors outnumbered the audience.

KUMAR: But I must say the audience here is intelligent and alert. I remember when the first rotten egg hit me. It was exactly during the climatic scene. In spite of this, how can we honestly say that they have no respect for Shakespeare?

PROFESSOR: Long live Shakespeare. No, no, I wasn't talking about his being 400 years of age. I was referring to his works. Kumar, give me a cigarette. (*Kumar gives the packet to Professor*).

BABUJI: No. Shakespeare wouldn't do now. . .

PROFESSOR: If you want, I can make all the characters Indian. Remember my *Bangal ka Baniya*? An adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice.*

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

KUMAR: Yes, I remember your *Madhurena Samapayet* and *Bahvarambhe Laghukriya* for *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Much Ado About Nothing.*

PROFESSOR: I can transform all the characters into Hindustani. Even *Henry VI.* You must have read my article—"Was Shakespeare Indian?" I have tried to establish that there was the influence of Indian philosophy on his works.

BABUJI: You might as well prove that he was an Indian, and his real name was Sheshappa Ayyar.

PROFESSOR: But I am sure Shakespeare had read the Gita. Remember when Lady Blanche says in *King John*: "Which is the side that I must go withal? Whoever win, on that side shall I lose." This is exactly like Arjuna's predicament in the Mahabharata. Or like Hamlet's—"To be or not to be?"

KUMAR: How did you translate that?

PROFESSOR: Rahen ke na rahen.

BABUJI: Such a powerful soliloquy sounds like Bol Radha Bol. With dialogues like these, rotten eggs are no surprise. No, you will have to write a new play now.

PROFESSOR: Other than Shakespeare? I had thought of serving Shakespeare all my life—I mean by way of study and translation. In fact, one lifetime is too short a span to do all this. There is a lot to do on even small aspects of Shakespeare's works. Recently, I have taken up a new topic: Did Duncan sleep in the nude? This discovery will unearth many secrets of *Macbeth.* Like why didn't Lady Macbeth kill Duncan immediately on entering his chamber; or why did she faint afterwards? Why. . .

BABUJI: You will have to write a completely different play.

PROFESSOR: You know, I have written other types of plays too. People said it was necessary to write absurd plays to become a modern playwright. So I wrote. . .

KUMAR: *Ramblings of the Yeti.*

PROFESSOR. No. It was the *Soliloquy of the Snowman.*

KUMAR: And such tongue-twisting dialogues. It's easier to say she sells sea shells.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

MEENA: Those were the Yeti's dialogues. As for you, you can't even speak simple straight-forward lines properly. Remember, when you had to say to me "I have no faith in your entity" (astitva) you said "I have no faith in your chastity (satitva).

PROFESSOR: Dialogue delivery is an art. In my class, you. . .

KUMAR: I have told you time and again that I was a Science student. I had nothing to do with your classes. It's only out of sheer respect that I call you sir.

(Professor takes another cigarette from Kumar's packet. He has been chain smoking. Kumar can't ask for a cigarette in Babuji's presence and is annoyed that the Professor is smoking away his cigarettes.

BABUJI: Well, if you can't write a new play, we shall have to ask someone else.

PROFESSOR: Someone else's play while I am here? I am a Founder Member of this organisation.

BABUJI: This organisation belongs only to me. The lead actor is my employee. I pay for the room where you have rehearsals. . .

MEENA: But this is my house. That I belong to Babuji is another matter.

KUMAR: Sir, why argue? Write a play as Babuji commands.

PROFESSOR: But Shakespeare. . .my principles. . .

BABUJI: What principles? You are a hired writer. Your job is to entertain the people.

PROFESSOR: Then I shall have to write according to their taste.

BABUJI: There is no such thing as the people's taste. I decide their taste. There is no such thing as a public opinion. What I write becomes public opinion. The headlines of my newspaper today become the people's slogans tomorrow. I point my finger, and the masses follow like a flock of sheep in that direction.

PROFESSOR: But Shakespeare. . .

BABUJI: If I want, I can banish Shakespeare from this town. Understand?

PROFESSOR: Yes, I understand. On what subject do I have to write this new play?

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

KUMAR: Sir, write something on the problems of students. These days everyone is concerned about this issue. Just give me the student leader's role and. . .

BABUJI: I doubt if you can convincingly portray even your own self. If you could act a wee bit of what you do in real life, we wouldn't be getting such scathing reviews. Professor, we need a really meaty play this time.

PROFESSOR: (*taking out his notebook*) On what subject?

BABUJI: On the current situation.

PROFESSOR: (*writing*) On the current situation (*absent-mindedly*) tea. . .

BABUJI: Let us discuss the subject now. Kumar, tea. . .

KUMAR: (*absent-mindedly*) Ramu, tea.

(*All become conscious of Ram's absence*).

BABUJI: It seems Ramu hasn't come yet.

KUMAR: (*dramatically*) Ramu. Tea. (*Ram enters with the tea. All heave a sigh of relief. After serving tea, Ram sits near Babuji and begins polishing his shoes. Accidentally, he spills Kumar's tea. Kumar slaps him, then forgets him*).

BABUJI: These days, everyone is talking of social commitments. Therefore, we'll have to take up some burning problems of the day.

PROFESSOR: Burning problems? You mean burning of the seventy year old Harijan by some caste Hindus? Or the burning of the buses by the college students? Or bride burning?

KUMAR: Or that old woman who died after a twelve-hour wait in the queue?

MEENA: What about those lovers who had to end their lives because they belonged to different communities?

PROFESSOR: How I can write about them? What I know is only from newspaper reports. I have no personal knowledge about them.

MEENA: I know about that woman in the queue. She was a black marketeer, or else what does an old woman need vegetable oil for? I am sure she wanted to buy it so as to sell it again on premium. This is the main cause of shortage of essential commodities.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

PROFESSOR: It's quite possible she died of hunger, and this talk of dying in the queue is just to malign the government.

MEENA: That old Harijan might have been burnt by the overturning of a lantern. The lovers might have taken some poisonous drug by mistake. The bus might have been burnt due to a short circuit.

BABUJI: We shall have to write a play about such people. On little problems of little people. About the underdogs of the society. Their uplift is our sacred duty. We have to elevate their social status. We must fulfil this duty of ours through our play. No more plays of your kings, merchants and gentlemen, please. Let's now talk about the common man. Tom, Dick and Harry. Ram, Shyam and. . .well, this Ramu for instance. (*All eyes turn to the brooding Ram*). Yes, write a play on Ramu.

PROFESSOR: I need seven days.

BABUJI: Know anything about him? Who is he? Where has he come from? How many brothers, sisters he has? Where he stays?

PROFESSOR: To tell you the truth, I know nothing about him.

MEENA: No one knows anything about him. I don't even know if he is married. Ramu, are you married?

KUMAR: We keep a servant and we know nothing about him.

PROFESSOR: (*Looks at Ramu*) Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look: he thinks too much, such men are dangerous.

BABUJI: We didn't even know his name when he came about five years ago. We used to call him: eh, boy!

PROFESSOR: As far as I remember, it is we who had named him. Ramu.

MEENA: If I were to give a name, I would have called him Raj Kumar.

PROFESSOR: No, Ramu. If I am to write about such a man, he has to be called only Ramu, nothing else.

BABUJI: I am sure that's what must have been in our minds while naming him. O.K. Professor, now start writing. Don't forget that it is our bounden duty to

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

uplift the lower classes, the underdog.

KUMAR: What is there to write about these people? These characters are colourless. How do you fit in a heroine? I wouldn't play the lead in such a play. It'll be disastrous for my image.

BABUJI: You know, for quite some time, I have been thinking of having a new lead actor.

KUMAR: A new lead actor? After all those rotten eggs, tomatoes and chappals—

BABUJI: Ramu, go and ask the driver to bring the car. (*Ram exits*) Ramu could be given Ramu's role. (*goes in*)

MEENA: Wonderful! Ramu won't even have to act. His entering the stage, as it is, will be sufficient.

KUMAR: Nonsense. Acting needs talent.

PROFESSOR: Ramu is also eager to act. In fact, we'd have found it difficult to manage without Ramu. We need him from cleaning the rehearsal rooms to handling the main curtain.

MEENA: It was he who was roughed up by the audience when we had to cancel the show due to heavy rains.

(*Babuji calls her inside, she goes*)

KUMAR: This has nothing to do with acting ability.

PROFESSOR: What you do on stage most of the time also has nothing to do with acting ability.

KUMAR: Why not write about someone in the upper middle class? They too have their problms like the rising cost of petrol; the acute scarcity of imported cosmetics, and so on.

PROFESSOR: No, it has to be Ramu. Let me get some details from him, then see the kind of play I will give you. (*Babuji enters. He is in coat and tie now. Soon after, Ram enters. He informs him that the car is ready.*)

BABUJI: You wait here. I will be back in ten minutes after seeing a friend at the station.

PROFESSOR: Now, let's begin. (*takes out his notebook Ram sits at his feet.*)

KUMAR: While you write the play, please don't forget that I will be doing the lead role.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

MEENA: First of all, the name. The hero's name is Raj Kumar.

PROFESSOR: Ramu, what is your name?

RAM: Ram.

MEENA: Ramchandra, Ramlal, Ram Kumar, Ram Prakash, Ram Mohan. . .

PROFESSOR: No, no. your real name. Ramu is a name we gave you. What did your parents name you?

RAM: My name is Ram.

KUMAR: Full name Ramdas. When I do this role, people will be reminded of Devdas.

MEENA: Or of Charandas, the *Chor* (thief).

PROFESSOR: Think hard and tell me your actual name. Yadu, Madhu, Shyam. . .

RAM: Shyam is my brother's name.

KUMAR: Excellent. Thank you, Ramdas, (*affectionately slaps Ram*). Ram and Shyam. Twin brothers. Double role. Sir, I have no objection in doing this role.

PROFESSOR: What about your family members?

RAM: No one else. Just my brother.

PROFESSOR: Your home, where is it?

RAM: I don't remember. We came here years ago.

PROFESSOR: Who is "we".

RAM: Me, Shyam and all our village folk.

PROFESSOR: When did you come ? Why?

RAM: That was the year of the famine. There had been no rains; all the ponds and streams had dried up. The crop was scorched; farming came to a standstill. Hunger all around. Not even a drop of water was available. We consumed all the wild fruits and roots in the forest. Even the tree leaves were not spared. We all had to leave the village. We sold off or pawned our belongings. Empty-handed, hungry, thirsty, we moved towards the city. After seven day's march, we arrived here. Four old men and two children died on the way. Everyone moved on ; only we two were left behind.

KUMAR: Which two?

PROFESSOR: Don't interrupt. Ram and Shyam, who else ? Then what?

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

RAM: I was almost dying. I had high fever, I lay under a tree mumbling and unconscious. I was dying of hunger but there was nothing to eat. I felt as if I were in a dream. In one such dream Shyam came to me and told me that he was going to find something for me to eat.

KUMAR: What happened to Shyam after that?

PROFESSOR: Shut up (*lights a cigarette, offers a cigarette to Kumar, but keeps the packet in his pocket*). I am writing this play. I need these details. We have had enough about Shyam. Ramu, do you remember your parents?

RAM: No. I only remember that we were farmers.

PROFESSOR: What's your caste?

RAM: I don't know.

KUMAR: I hope he is not a Harijan (*moves away from Ram*). He has been with us for such a long time, and we don't even know his caste.

PROFESSOR: Will you please keep quiet. What happened after that ?

RAM: I recovered. I started begging for a living. Then came the long awaited rains. I got a job. The villagers returned to the village. I stayed behind. But Shyam did not return.

KUMAR: Perhaps he's still looking for some food for you.

RAM: I have food and shelter. Babuji's expensive car is my room partner. And as for food, I ate to my heart's content yesterday morning.

MEENA: Yesterday morning? What do you mean? Haven't you had food since?

PROFESSOR: For god's sake, stop. All these stupid questions. Yes, go on. . .

RAM: I did many odd jobs in the city. Shoe shine, coolie, waiter, peon, cinema usher . . .

MEENA: What happened to Shyam?

RAM: I don't know. But he knows everything about me. Sometimes he sends me news. He also writes letters.

PROFESSOR : What news? What does he write?

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

RAM: Very strange things. Once he wrote : we are getting ready.

PROFESSOR : Who's we ? What were they getting ready for ?

RAM: That's all he wrote. In another letter he wrote : I am coming soon ; wait for me. But he didn't come. After that, he sent this book (*takes out a book from his pocket and gives it to the Professor*) and wrote : in our struggle, this book shall be our weapon.

KUMAR: What book?

PROFESSOR : *Gandhivani.* The message of Gandhi (*gives the book to Kumar*).

KUMAR: You receive his letters and yet you don't know his whereabouts?

RAM: I get bits and pieces of news about him. Sometimes people come and tell me about him. Once I heard that he had been jailed for theft. But I know he is no thief. Another time that he had burnt his hand while making crackers for Diwali. I keep getting such news of him. I don't know what to believe and what not to believe.

KUMAR: (*Discovers a photo in the book*) When did you have this photograph taken? (*Gives the snapshot to Meena.*)

RAM: This is Shyam's photograph. He sent it with his letter,

KUMAR: What nonsense: This is your photograph. The eyes, the nose, the ears—they're all yours

MEENA: Look at his eyes. (*Kumar stares at Ram's eyes*). No, the eyes in photograph.

KUMAR: What's so special about them? Sir, do have a look.

PROFESSOR: Meena is right. Just look at them. Know what they are saying? That we know everything. You can't fool us any more. I have been dumb and mute all along, but no more. The time has come.

MEENA: The eyes are saying : come and stand before me. Today is the day of your trial. You shall have to answer now.

PROFESSOR: The eyes are saying . . .

KUMAR: Oh, no. This is Ramu's photo. I can swear that it

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

is Ramu, only Ramu and nobody but Ramu. If this is Shyam, then I bet that either Shyam and Ramu are the same person or else they're twins.

MEENA: You seem to be seeing too many films.

KUMAR: What's so special about the eyes? I think you are unnecessarily trying to be melodramatic.

PROFESSOR: In my class, I once explained a poem about the eyes which . . .

KUMAR: I was never your student.

PROFESSOR: Then let me do my work. I am talking to Ram; you keep quiet, or else leave the class room. You'll understand everything once the play's completed.

KUMAR: Give me back my packet. (*Professor lights a cigarette and hands over the packet to Kumar. He and Ram go towards the rear and continue their discussion. Kumar and Meena sit down. Kumar makes to take a cigarette, but discovers that the packet is empty. Disgusted, he throws the packet away.*)

KUMAR: The old hog has finished the whole packet. Always borrows money. When you ask him to return, starts quoting Shakespeare: "He who steals my purse steals trash". (*Meena pays no attention*). I am thinking of shifting to Bombay. There is no future for me here.

MEENA: You have acted in eight plays.

KUMAR: You must have seen the reviews. They said that I have not acted in eight plays but have done the same role in eight plays.

MEENA: If the opinion of critics were taken seriously, I don't think any art form in the world would have prospered.

KUMAR: But you know, I sometimes feel that they are absolutely right. I have no talents. I am only fit to be a clerk in Babuji's office, which I am.

MEENA: What are you going to do with your future?

KUMAR: You have known me for so many years. We have acted together. Do you think I am capable of getting anywhere?

MEENA: That's up to you.

KUMAR: Why are you so indifferent towards me? Don't you

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

know that I think a lot about you and want to say something to you?

MEENA: What is it?

KUMAR: I want to tell you about myself. My thoughts, my actions, my problems. How I came to Babuji after a long fruitless search for a job. How I am being compelled to marry a girl I have not even seen. How . . .

MEENA: Yes, yes. What else?

KUMAR: If you don't want to listen, I have nothing to tell you.

MEENA: I hope you are not going to talk about love?

KUMAR: You never let me say anything. I think of so many things. Spend sleepless nights. But when I see you I just dry up. May be, it's because you don't want to listen to me.

MEENA: Dou you know anything about me?

KUMAR: You are an artiste and art is your life.

MEENA: Do you know anything about my personal life?

KUMAR: I do not want to know anything.

MEENA: That's because you are afraid to face the truth of my life. You want to know me, but from a safe distance.

KUMAR: That's not true. I can't exactly say what I want, but . . .

MEENA: Do you know of my relationship with Babuji?

KUMAR: I don't want to know.

MEENA: I am his mistress. He owns the house I live in; he owns the car I drive. These saris that I wear. Babuji has paid for my body and soul. Oh yes, now tell me what you want to say.

KUMAR: I don't want to say anything. I am leaving this city.

MEENA: Foolish dreams. Do you think I could ever be free? All my life I have merely changed cages. Who shall release me? I am like the stone Ahilya, I am the accursed Kubja. My life is a wait. But where are the foot steps of Ramchandra? Where is the magic touch of Krishna?

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

KUMAR: All this is stupid talk. If we decide, we could this very minute. . .

(*Professor comes upstage. The mood changes. Kumar becomes silent.*)

PROFESSOR: Interesting. Very interesting.

KUMAR: This lunatic won't let us talk. (*Irritated to Professor*) What happened, sir?

PROFESSOR: The play will be written. About the other person.

KUMAR: Now who is this other person?

MEENA: Don't be silly. Shyam, Who else?

KUMAR: (*irritated*) Who is Shyam?

MEENA: You have forgotten everything. Shyam is Ramu's brother, who else ?

PROFESSOR: Shyam is not only Ramu's brother. He stands for all that which Ramu is not.

KUMAR: Why is such a fuss being made about Shyam ? Babuji asked you to write a play about Ramu.

PROFESSOR: Not possible. There is no drama in his life. He has no individuality. He is just a part of the crowd, He has no birth, life or death of his own. He has only a momentary existence. He is just one of a large slogan shouting procession. He is one of the masses who pull the chariot. They are not individual persons ; they are a crowd. I shall have to write about Shyam.

MEENA: What do you know about Shyam?

PROFESSOR: Ramu has told me enough. If required, I may have to meet Shyam.

MEENA: Can we meet Shyam? How? When?

KUMAR: There is no such person as Shyam. He is just a figment of Ramu's imagination. Have you forgotten that Ramu saw him in a delirium? Sick and deprived people do have such hallucinations.

PROFESSOR: Wrong. My interpretation is different. If you recollect, I had said . . .

KUMAR: Sir . . .

PROFESSOR: I know, you were not my student. One does not feel proud of boys like you being his students. Not in my class, but in one of my plays I had dealt with a similar situation. Lest the audience would not

understand it, I had to edit it. But that is a different story.

KUMAR: We are making a mountain of a mole-hill. There is no one called Shyam. This photograph is Ramu's. Ramu talks of Shyam, yet he doesn't know where he lives, what he does. I can prove that all this is a big lie. Ramu . . . (*Kumar slaps Ram when he goes near him*).

MEENA: What is this?

KUMAR: Ramu, tell us the truth about what you have told us.

RAM: I am leaving.

(*Meena stops Kumar from slapping Ram again.*)

KUMAR: Where will you go? What will you do? If you do not come clean, I'll tell Babuji and he'll throw you out. What is this nonsense you have been telling us? What proof do you have that you have a brother?

RAM. The book, the photo, the letters.

KUMAR: You have time till Babuji arrives—tell him the truth. If you dare tell a lie . . .

RAM: I am not staying.

KUMAR: Go then, get out, go wherever you want.

(*Ram exits*)

MEENA: Ramu can go away. Where can we go even if we want to ? I think I am a part of the Professor's crowd. I am here in this luxurious apartment by accident and due to somebody's kindness.

PROFESSOR: The truth is that we all are in the same boat. We are dependent on somebody.

KUMAR: No, Meena is referring only to me. But I don't agree. I am not a part of the crowd. I have no affinity with a person like Ramu. There is no comparison.

PROFESSOR: You know nothing about Ramu. I learnt today that Ramu is supporting two of his brothers in their studies.

KUMAR: From where did these two brothers crop up? The truth is out. He claimed they are only two brothers.

MEENA: Can't you understand, he calls everyone his brother. You remember when we didn't get the permission to perform our play, Ramu got it through his brother.

KUMAR: Is his brother some high official?

MEENA: No, he is a mere clerk. But Ramu says that this brother of his runs the entire office. The whole office machinery comes to a standstill in his absence.

KUMAR: This is somehow getting complicated. I feel we are unnecessarily exaggerating the matter. Ramu is our servant. Why write a play on him?

PROFESSOR: Kumar, I have written a lot in my life. But this play shall be written with complete devotion and belief. This shall be my masterpiece. I wouldn't regret even if I gave up writing altogether after this play.

KUMAR: Have you considered the audience ?

PROFESSOR: Every writer reaches a state of intellectual dilemma when the audience, the publisher, the reader all lose their significance for him. His thoughts, his convictions, his social commitments overshadow everything. Today I feel that I have reached that stage.

KUMAR: You have not forgotten Babuji's wishes, I hope.

PROFESSOR: I am writing this play on his instructions.

(*Babuji enters. He looks downcast.*)

PROFESSOR: Back so soon ? Was the train on time?

BABUJI: I couldn't make it to the station. All the roads are blocked. There is a strike in downtown. I had to return halfway.

KUMAR: Strike? What for?

BABUJI: You don't need a reason for a strike. I had to meet this person urgently, but I couldn't. Many will be prevented from reaching the station, the patient his doctor, students going for exams, an applicant to an interview. . . none of them will be able to reach their destination. The famine stricken won't get their food supplies. This is the result of a strike. Even we had gone on strikes, but never like. . .

MEENA: Why, in those days didn't strikes inconvenience the people? Didn't food supplies get held up?

BABUJI: (*ignoring the question*). There has to be a cause for a strike. There is no cause at present. All these strikes, bandhs, gheraos for no reason. I saw a notice on the way. . .the entire city will be closed next week. These are all signs of fascism. Such things throw up a Hitler. This country is going to the dogs. Anyway, let's forget all this. Despite all this, the show must go on. Now, Professor, the play.

PROFESSOR: I've collected relevant material on Shyam.

BABUJI: Shyam, who's he?

KUMAR: Ramu's brother, who else?

BABUJI: How did this brother get into the act? Thought about the plot?

PROFESSOR: Not much about that. But at least, I have decided to write only about a man such as Shyam. Famine-stricken, he abandons his village for the city. No food, no shelter. Life a struggle. But he doesn't dream only of his daily bread. He wants to be an equal member of the society and, therefore, studies *Gandhivani*.

BABUJI: I have been thinking of producing a totally experimental play. No Sense. Nonsensical. Absurd. You know what the people want these days? Anti-poetry, anti-novel, anti-love story. This anti-play's anti-hero shall be Ramu.

KUMAR: Can he play the role?

BABUJI: A mere fortnight of working on him and you'll see. . .

KUMAR: Ramu? In two weeks?

BABUJI: Just watch, Ramu

(*Ram enters suddenly as though he had never exited, but had been there all along listening to their conversation.*)

BABUJI: Want to play the hero?

RAM: Yes sir,

BABUJI: Can you dance?

RAM: Yes sir.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

BABUJI: What dance?

RAM: Monkey dance. (*Begins to dance*).

BABUJI: What are you called?

RAM: Hanuman. Hail Sri Ramchandra! (Bol Siyapati Ramchandra ki Jai!)

BABUJI: Will you answer my questions?

RAM: At your service, sir.

BABUJI: Who's this? (*Pointing to Kumar*).

RAM: He thinks he's a hero.

BABUJI: But in fact?

RAM: A complete zero.

BABUJI: Who's this? (*Pointing to Professor*).

RAM: He thinks he is Shakespeare.

BABUJI: But in fact?

RAM: Only a hired translator.
(*Everyone is amused. Ram sits down.*)

PROFESSOR: Great. We were not aware of this. Now my play will have immense possibilities.

BABUJI: This is the director's magic (*to Kumar*) Can you imitate him?

KUMAR No sir.

BABUJI: Can you dance?

KUMAR: No sir.

BABUJI: What's your name?

KUMAR: Hanuman. No, no, Ramchandra.
No, no, Kumar.

BABUJI: Well, Professor?

PROFESSOR: I am Rishi Balmiki. . .

BABUJI: Not your name! I am asking you about Kumar's ability.

PROFESSOR: After seeing Ramu, I am thinking. . .

BABUJI: I know what you are thinking. Don't mention Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin is dead. And he has had too many imitators. You just stick to your style. I want this fast, so we can perform before summer.

PROFESSOR: Fine, I'll take a week.

BABUJI: All right, we meet here after seven days.

KUMAR: But after seven days is the strike.

BABUJI: I'll handle the strike. Now, Professor. . .

PROFESSOR: Very well, sir, (*hesistantly*) I needed some money.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

(*Babuji takes out his stuffed wallet and offers it to the Professor who reaches out for it*).

BABUJI: I will let you have all this, (*withdrawing it*) but only when you have completed the play.

PROFESSOR: I need it urgently.

BABUJI: Enough. That's that (*gets up. All follow suit*).

RAM: What about me?

BABUJI: (*surveying the room*) Why is everything so dirty? I notice that lately you are becoming careless in your duties. Clean the house immediately. (*Ram starts collecting the peanut shells in a paper bag, Babuji goes in*).

KUMAR: Sir, I am thinking of shifting to Bombay.

PROFESSOR: Why, have you got a job there?

KUMAR: No, my talent is being stifled here. Everyone insults me. Everyone hates me. Especially Ramu. (*goes to Ram*) Just what do you want?

RAM: I am going to clean up this place till everything is spick and span.

KUMAR: Everything is going wrong just because of this play about you.

RAM: Not a small particle of dust will escape me. (*Professor on his way out lights a cigarette and hands over the packet to Kumar. Kumar again finds it empty. Irritated, he takes leave of Meena and exits. Ram is hard at work*).

MEENA: Ramu, will you answer my questions?

RAM: Yes, why not?

(*Babuji calls for Meena*).

MEENA: Look, Babuji is calling me. Tell me honestly, where does Shyam live?

RAM: Sometimes in Mathura, sometimes in Dwarka, sometimes in Vrindavan.

MEENA: Don't talk nonsense. Who are you?

RAM: I am Hanuman. My house is in Kishkindha. It is my life's ambition to serve Ramchandra. All glory to Sri Ramchandra. Bol Siyapati Ramchandra ki Jai.

MEENA: I desperately need Shyam's address. (*Babuji calls out again. Meena on her way in stops. She gives*

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

some money to Ram from her purse). You haven't eaten since yesterday. Please tell me, are you . .

RAM: (*rises with the paper bag in his hand*) I am Hanuman. My tail shall lengthen like a queue. I shall burn the golden city of Lanka. I shall exterminate the family of Ravana. (*Meena exits. Gradual darkness. Curtain.*)

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

ACT TWO

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

(*A week later. Ram is alone, cleaning the room Meena enters from inside.*)

MEENA: Who else was here?

RAM: No one. I was alone.

MEENA: I heard someone talking.

RAM: I was talking to Shyam.

MEENA: Shyam? Did he come?

RAM: Whenever I am alone, I talk to Shyam. I feel relieved.

MEENA: I am dying to meet Shyam.

RAM: He'll be here soon.

MEENA: How do you know?

RAM: In his last letter, he had written that the time is nearly ripe.

MEENA: Please make sure that I get to meet Shyam.

RAM: When Shyam comes . . . .
(*Just then Kumar enters*).

MEENA: Yes, when Shyam comes?
(*Ram remains silent*).

KUMAR: Who is this Shyam?

MEENA: Ramu's brother, who else?

KUMAR: Why are we all so concerned about Shyam? It is now becoming irritating. All these discussions over a lie. I tell you, Shyam does not exist.

RAM: Shyam is my brother. He's told me, he'll be here very soon.

KUMAR: When did he tell you? When did you meet him?

MEENA: Ramu talks to Shyam when he is alone.

KUMAR: When he is alone? How can that be?

RAM: I tell Shyam my problems. He knows everything about me.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

KUMAR: If you love your brother, have you tried to locate him? Have you informed the police? Have you advertised in the newspapers?

RAM: Shyam told me not to try to locate him. He will return when the time comes.

KUMAR: When will that time come?

RAM: Soon.

KUMAR: Nonsense. This Professor too hasn't arrived yet. All roads are blocked. I don't know whether he'll be able to make it.

MEENA: All roads blocked? Must be the strike. But it is all calm and quiet in this part of the city. My home is as safe as a fortress; no outsider can come in.

KUMAR: The main road was jampacked.

MEENA: How did you come?

KUMAR: I had to find my way through the crowds. You know how I felt? All shops, markets closed. Picketing on the roads. But the procession moved on. The sea of people continued to swell. Suddenly I felt that I should be with them. I belong there. My family, my job have no significance. They are all an illusion like our plays. I felt as if that procession was the ultimate truth.

RAM: (*to himself*) Shyam will come.

MEENA: Then, why did you come? Why didn't you join the procession?

KUMAR: I did a lot of thinking when I went home last week. About myself, about all of us, about our plays, about Ramu. Everything became topsy-turvy. I realised that I had no relation with the outside world, as though I was afraid of reality. I was afraid of confronting it. You are right. I put on a mask whenever I am faced with reality. Have you ever been faced with such a problem?

MEENA: I have already told you that I am an Ahilya of stone. With no future. I have no demands, no desires. Neither for marriage nor for home. I am just looking for my moment of revenge. What about you?

KUMAR: I want to revolt. I want to fight. I want to destroy everything.

MEENA: You can express your protest through the Professor's play.

KUMAR: No, not theatrical protests. I mean real protest.

MEENA: Protest against what?

KUMAR: Against everyone. Against society. Against education. Against law. Against power. Against one's own self. Protest for protest's sake.

MEENA: All this anger is useless. Such sentimentality can have no purpose. You find rebels without cause only in films.

KUMAR: Then what shall I do?

MEENA: The moment of decision shall come again. Can you decide now not to retreat at that moment?

(*Kumar remains silent. Just then the Professor enters. He appears excited.*)

KUMAR: Thank God, you've come. What about the script?

PROFESSOR: The script is ready. Nothing can stop it now.

MEENA: You didn't have any problems in coming here.

PROFESSOR: My kurta got torn in the crowd and I lost my walking stick.

KUMAR: Not the script, I hope.

PROFESSOR: No, I saved that.

KUMAR: Wasn't the main road very crowded?

PROFESSOR: I could have taken another route, but I wanted to study the mob psychology after having started this script. That day too I went by the station where the strikers had collected. As I mingled in the crowd, I had a new awareness. I realised that I had all along been moving in the wrong direction, I had been avoiding the crowd. But now I felt one with it. (*Kumar offers the Professor a cigarette, but he declines*). I realised that I had a common cause with the crowd. I realised that all my other objectives of life had been meaningless. Previously, the crowd was for me a faceless, shapeless assembly of people; but once with them, I realised that a mob was not an inanimate object—it was made of living, familiar people. I spied a neighbour who

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

otherwise leads a dreary dull existence. I recognised two of my students whose presence I had never felt in the classroom. They made me feel proud of them. I felt that the procession was endless. From one alley to another, from one road to another; from the village to the city; from the city to the capital. This journey shall only end at its destination.

(Babuji enters. All rise. He is visibly annoyed. All resume their seats after he is seated.)

BABUJI: This strike is getting out of hand. Nobody is willing to listen. If it continues, life will become very difficult.

MEENA: Was there any problem on the way?

BABUJI: They smashed the windshield of my car.

MEENA: Which car? The small one or the big one?

BABUJI: It's not a question of a broken windshield. The insurance company will take care of that. I am amazed at their audacity.

PROFESSOR: Windshields will get smashed. Clothes will be torn. Many will betray. Some will prove difficult. But the procession will go on.

(Babuji looks at the Professor, surprised.)

BABUJI: Script?

PROFESSOR: Ready.

KUMAR: You think we'll be able to do anything with all this trouble.

BABUJI: This trouble will have to be curbed. What have you written?

PROFESSOR: About Shyam.

BABUJI: *(not quite there; worried about the crowd outside)*. Who is Shyam?

RAM: Shyam is my brother.

MEENA: All crusaders against evil are brothers.

RAM: I saw my brother in my dream last night.

MEENA: A new avatar was born.

RAM: Shyam was in a new dress.

MEENA: In yellow clothes, he carried the conch, the chakra, the club and the lotus. A crown of peacock feathers on his head.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

RAM: He had many followers.

MEENA: The army of the Pandavas.

RAM: I was terrified.

MEENA: Whenever religion declines and evil reigns supreme . . .

RAM: He appeared before me.

MEENA: He arrives to destroy the evil, and protects the good.

BABUJI: Now, what drama is this? Professor, start reading your script.

PROFESSOR: Dedication. My play is dedicated to Ramu and the other downtrodden . . .

BABUJI: Dedication later. First let us find out what you have written.

PROFESSOR: First Act. First Scene.

BABUJI: How many sets?

PROFESSOR: Just one—the Rajpath.

KUMAR: Rajpath or Janpath? Or where they intersect? One road at the crossing leads to the Past and the other towards the Future. The intersecting road takes you to the Present. All characters who dwell on these roads live in the respective periods of time. A youth on this side of the crossing transforms into an old man on the other side. What scope for acting!

BABUJI: Shut up. Yes, Professor, how many hero-heroines?

PROFESSOR: This play has neither hero nor heroine.

BABUJI: Will we have an empty stage?

PROFESSOR: I mean, not the conventional hero-heroines. The people of the road shall be my heroes.

BABUJI. Excellent. What happens to Shyam?

PROFESSOR: Ram or Shyam. He is one of them. He is not a leader or hero in the traditional sense. He is just there.

BABUJI: What'll happen on this road?

PROFESSOR: People are going and coming. Such people who constitute a majoritiy of our society: They spend their lives on this road. They are born, grow up and are left to die on this road.

BABUJI: Tremendous.

PROFESSOR: First Act, First Scene. First, the set. The Rajpath of an anonymous town in this country.

KUMAR: If you place a drain pipe on the road, people will recognise Bombay.

PROFESSOR: Here, life is complete in itself. The sun rises and sets on this road. Sometimes a wail of a new born, sometimes a howl for a dead one. The queue at the ration shop has crawled up to the road. People have gathered here to watch a film star alighting from his limosine. These people sometimes are thrashing eve-teasers; sometimes carrying a dying beggar to the hospital. Underneath the lamp post a fat ugly man stands smoking. A heavily made-up young girl seeks customers. The black marketeers transact their business in the dark; the keepers of law collect their hush money quietly. This is the day and the night of the Rajpath.

BABUJI: Very good.

(*The Professor goes to the window and looks out.*)

PROFESSOR: Such was the road I visualised while writing, as though it's my entire life and not merely a road. (*The noise of the procession can be heard from the outside.*)

BABUJI: Perhaps they have reached here. Ramu, go down and check the car. (*Ram goes*).

MEENA: The insurance people will compensate for any harm done to the car. But if something happens to Ramu, who will be responsible ? But then who will harm Ramu?

PROFESSOR: This is exactly the situation I have taken in the first draft of my play. (*returns from the window*).

BABUJI: Very good. But, the climax?

PROFESSOR: I am still working on the first draft. But I have roughly decided on the climax. The first part will show the poverty of the people of this road. The family of Ram and Shyam has gone through the heat, the cold, the rain, the hunger, the thirst, the dust of the zooming cars, the exploitation of the law keepers. The second part of the play has the procession. Ram and Shyam have joined it.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

BABUJI: Very exciting. But in the last scene . . . .

PROFESSOR: In the last scene, a miracle. (*Gives a dramatic pause.*)

BABUJI: What happens in the last scene?

(*The Professor is silent.*)

KUMAR: Did an earthquake wipe out the road?

MEENA: Or nothing happened? Or was everybody left rooted on the road? Or did the sun just rise and set again?

PROFESSOR: No. The backdrop slid out.

BABUJI: Excellent, excellent.

MEENA: Just then, a flash of lightning and thunder boomed.

PROFESSOR: Behind the backdrop loomed the gate of a palace, just out of the blue. . . .There is a different sort of people on the other side of the gate. The Sethji, the owner of this house. His supporters, politicians, goondas. The gate is shut. Sethji's people are carrying sticks. In Sethji's hand is a gun. The politician is flanked by his hirelings. (*The Professor is now highly excited. Pauses*) Everything went topsy-turvy.

MEENA: In the background, the bugles of the battle.

PROFESSOR: The procession stops at the gate.

(*Babuji watches the procession from the window.*)

The procession of the sick, the aged, the women and the children. Shyam is at its head.

MEENA: The sound of a conch shell rends the air.

PROFESSOR: His hands are empty.

MEENA: Except for the. . .

PROFESSOR: Except for the *Gandhivani*, nothing else. In a second, nothing is left. Everything is swept up in the surging sea of the masses. Past, future, everything. Sethji, the official, the politician, the pimp, the goondas are swept away.

MEENA: The army of the Kauravas retreats.

PROFESSOR: The people enter the palace.

MEENA: There is a shower of petals from the heavens.

BABUJI: Great. This play will bring about a revolution (*looks out*).

KUMAR: (*impressed*) Congratulations, sir, I shall be honoured to do even a bit role in this play. Today I am

proud to be your student. Have a cigarette, sir (*offers one*).

PROFESSOR: I have given up smoking.

BABUJI: This is a great play.

PROFESSOR: My ultimate creation. The more I think about it, the deeper I sink into it. All this while, I have been surviving on foreign plays in translation. In the name of modern plays, I wrote trite dialogues as in the *Soliloquy of the Snowman* and thereby fooled myself and my audience.

BABUJI: The critics have been accusing us of perpetuating a socially alienated theatre. This play will give them many a sleepless night.

PROFESSOR: Thank you. I have realised my duty towards the society. Whatever we did in the past had no relevance to our lives. We hear the shouting masses outside, while inside the auditorium we try to humour the selected few with the antics of a clown.

BABUJI: This play will give a new direction.

KUMAR: When do we begin rehearsals?

BABUJI: Yes, we must also consider that. Professor, what's on your mind?

PROFESSOR: We could begin tomorrow. And with your permission, I'd like to direct the play myself. I feel that nobody else will be able to communicate my message.

BABUJI: Fair enough.

PROFESSOR: Then, when can we begin?

BABUJI: I have decided (*walks to the window*).

KUMAR: Very good.

PROFESSOR: I can begin right away.

(*Babuji returns to his seat.*)

BABUJI: I have decided not to stage this play.

PROFESSOR: You mean, not just now.

BABUJI: I mean never. You can stop further work on the play.

PROFESSOR: I can't beat a retreat now. I will stage this play. If not here, then somewhere else.

BABUJI: You think you can stage this play if I don't want you to?

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

PROFESSOR: I will definitely complete it and stage this play. This play will be the symbol of my intellectual independence.

BABUJI You and independence? Some stupid slogans have turned your head. Look at yourself once again. You stay in what is my house. My mills clothe you; my factories supply you your pen and ink. I control your thoughts. You have mortgaged your whole being to me.

PROFESSOR: Thank you. But I have decided once for all to go ahead with this play.

BABUJI: Then I will have to ask you to get out.

PROFESSOR: (*rises*) Many people have sacrificed everything for their principles. Namaskar.

MEENA: Kumar, there comes a moment in a man's life when he has to decide.

(*Kumar and the Professor look at each other. In agreement, they leave.*) The first scene ends here.

BABUJI: Only you are left.

MEENA: Me, Ram and Shyam.

BABUJI: Ramu, go and see where they have gone to. (*Ram goes out*).

MEENA: They will merge in the crowd, never to be found again.

BABUJI: Won't you also go away?

MEENA: No, I am like a bird. The cage is my sky. I will always stay there. I will hold on to the gilded cage; to my security. Till someone sets me free.

BABUJI: Those two will also return to their cages. They don't know the vastness of the skies. They too are the birds of the cage.

MEENA: I am a mistress.

BABUJI: They are not any different. Like Ramu, my servants. No one can leave me.

MEENA: Ram may not leave, but he might think of revenge.

BABUJI: For revenge, it is necessary to have hatred. They are not capable of that. They can just talk of revolt. The Professor's writing is impotent anger. Kumar's protest is a melodramatic gimmick. And Ramu is a mere robot.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

MEENA: Like me. I am a different breed of robot. A puppet, a doll, whose eyes close when laid down.

BABUJI: Those two will not be able to go far away.

MEENA: This time they will not return. Such small incidents will add up to a great historical truth. These two will multiply into thousands.

BABUJI: Know who Shyam is? Shyam is the ideal they all just dream of. Everyone dreams of a saviour. In times of trouble, God is remembered. But no redeemer comes. One has to be one's own saviour.

MEENA: But Shyam will come.

BABUJI: Nobody will come. By this evening, they will return here just as the strikers will go back to their homes. When they return, they will have their heads bent low. Are you listening to that shouting outside? All hollow slogans. Take the Professor. He talks of intellectual freedom and yet begs for a little money. Kumar is a young man with his whole future wide open before him. But he has mortgaged himself to me in return for some temporary security.

MEENA: You forget one man. Who has nothing. No home. No family. No past. No future. No ambitions. No aims. That underdog of the society. Ramu.

BABUJI: They'll all return. At the right time, they'll all return.

(*As though echoing his words, the Professor and Kumar return with heads bowed. The Professor is smoking. Meena is shocked.*)

MEENA: You were right. We are all mistresses (*goes in*).

BABUJI: What if I refuse to accept you now?

PROFESSOR: We have no place to go. We are *trishankus*. There is a curfew clamped outside. We are stranded. The life of the strikers is endangered. We have realised that that is not our place We belong here.

BABUJI: Kumar, do you know your place now.

KUMAR: I am Hanuman (*kneeling*). To serve Shri Ramchandra is my duty.

BABUJI: And you, Professor?

PROFESSOR: I am Shakespeare. No, no, I am a mere translator. I have no originality.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

BABUJI: Whatever you have written so far. . .

PROFESSOR: . . .Is useless. I will tear it all up.

BABUJI: No need to destroy. I'll purchase it.
(*The Professor hands the script to Babuji, who throws some notes from his wallet. The Professor, on his hands and knees begins collecting them, Kumar is shocked.*)

KUMAR: Sir. . .

PROFESSOR: You were never my student. I was never your teacher.

BABUJI: I want a new script within seven days.

PROFESSOR: It will be done. As you like it. (*Meena enters, she has been crying.*)

MEENA: Where is Shyam?

PROFESSOR: Shyam doesn't exist.

MEENA: Where is Ram?
(*Ram comes in. Unafraid. Looks at Professor and Kumar with pity.*)

RAM: Now I'll have to call Shyam.

BABUJI: Where were you for such a long time?

RAM: I was looking for Shyam.

BABUJI: Shut up. Shyam doesn't exist.

RAM: Then I'll have to do it alone.

BABUJI: What do you mean?

RAM: I am Ram. I will go to Lanka and destory the family of Ravana. And my brother Shyam shall vanquish all evils at Kurukshetra.

BABUJI: Did you clean the room?

RAM: I shall clean up everything.
(*Babuji is looking for an excuse to rebuke Ram, he notices the paper bag.*)

BABUJI: One week's passed and this paper bag is still lying here.
(*Ram laughing picks up the bag. Babuji is getting angrier*) For so many days. . .
(*Ram comes to Babuji. Blows up the paper bag and bursts it in Babuji's face. The bag is empty. Babuji is flushed with anger. Amusement on Ram's face. Suddenly an explosion outside. Curtain.*)

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

ACT THREE

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

(*Seven days later, Kumar and Meena are in the room.*)

MEENA: We have been here for quite some time. You haven't uttered a word.

KUMAR: It is very hot today.

MEENA: I know. Won't you say something else.

KUMAR: The procession is swelling.

MEENA: I am not talking about the procession.

KUMAR: There is no sign of its abating. I don't think we'll be able to put on a play this time.

MEENA: I am not talking about the play. I am referring to the two of us.

KUMAR: Where is Babuji?

MEENA: Resting. You wanted to tell me something the other day

KUMAR: Much water has flown under the bridge since.

MEENA: Today, I want to say something to you.

KUMAR: Since then, I have become a permanent employee of Babuji.

MEENA: If I tell you. . .

KUMAR: I have written to my parents that I would marry the girl of their choice.

MEENA: Oh! I get it now. There is no salvation for you.
(*Kumar hangs his head. Babuji enters and at a glance comprehends the situation.*)

BABUJI: Why are you so quiet? Where is the Professor?

KUMAR: There is a lot of tension outside.

BABUJI. How did you manage to come?

KUMAR: I took a longer route. I'll just go and find the Professor.

BABUJI: He's bound to come. He needs money.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

MEENA: We all need something or the other. Kumar wants a promotion. I want a new sari.

BABUJI: The world lives on such needs.

KUMAR: Can we do the play in such chaotic conditions?

BABUJI: Why not? Has the strike stopped anything? The crowds in the hotels? The audience for the films? The lovers on the river side? Only the idle ones participate in these strikes. Everything else remains normal.

MEENA: The only inconvenience is that we have to use the small car instead of the big one.

(The Professor enters. He is out of breath having climbed up the stairs. He is carrying a walking stick and a notebook in his left hand; and a pen in his right hand. A cigarette in his mouth. He proceeds to read from his notebook.)

PROFESSOR: Today, I took a lonely route. On the way here, I came across two people who were ahead of me. They had probably lost their way. One of them remarked. . .

BABUJI: What did you write in your notebook?

PROFESSOR: *(referring to the notebook)*. Writers are tape recorders *(realising his mistake)*. This time, I didn't note their dialogues, because they had no literary significance.

BABUJI: What were they talking about?

PROFESSOR: They were talking of bloodshed.

BABUJI: Whose blood?

MEENA: Bloodshed in the Crusade at Kurukshetra. Shyam had said so explicitly.

PROFESSOR: May be Ram said this. In the context of the Ramayan. Because Shyam doesn't exist.

BABUJI: Correct. What did you see outside?

PROFESSOR: I came the other way. I got the impression that they were coming here.

BABUJI: What do you think? What is going to happen?

PROFESSOR: This country is going to the dogs.

BABUJI: And the result?

PROFESSOR. Nothing. Everything will be normal. I shall again write fairy tales and people will flock to see them.

BABUJI: And then?

PROFESSOR: Nothing.

MEENA: What will happen to Shyam?

KUMAR: Didn't you hear, Shyam doesn't exist. I have been proved right.

MEENA: But Ram is there.

BABUJI: Where is Ramu? Ramu. . .

PROFESSOR: Ramu. . .

KUMAR: Ramu. . .

(Ram enters. He places a paper bag on the centre table. All look at it curiously.)

RAM: Shyam has arrived. This is his gift for you. I will go and bring him in presently.

(Ignoring Babuji's commands, he goes away. Kumar looks out of the window.)

KUMAR: The procession has arrived.

MEENA. *(goes to the window)* Who is leading them?

KUMAR: I have never seen such a big crowd.

MEENA: Where is Shyam?

KUMAR: They are armed with lathis.

(The Professor, conscious of Babuji's glare, drops his stick.)

BABUJI: Kumar, come away. Let't listen to the Professor's script.

MEENA: The last scene of the play is being enacted down there

BABUJI: Meena, close that window.

(All sit down. Everyone is visibly excited with the exception of Babuji)

KUMAR. One doesn't know what's going to happen.

BABUJI: Nothing will happen. Professor, begin.

(The Professor takes out all the paper from his bag and looks for the script.)

MEENA: Once upon a time, there was a prince.

KUMAR: There will be real trouble today.

MEENA: The evil ones conspired and ousted him.

KUMAR: The people are charged today.

MEENA: The prince dreamt of his royal palace.

KUMAR: The huge masses on one side and a mere handful on the other.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

MEENA: But the gaint will have to be killed first.

KUMAR: Today, there may be bloodshed.

MEENA: But the life of the giant lies sealed in a box seven seas away. How to kill him?

(The Professor continues his search for the script.)

PROFESSOR: I have lost my script.

KUMAR: Let's postpone the play.

BABUJI: No, everything will proceed according to schedule.

MEENA: The prince will come riding on his white charger.

PROFESSOR: I have lost my script.

BABUJI: This won't work. The play will be staged as per announcement. I shall arrange everything. This procession will stop. The roads will be cleared for my car.

PROFESSOR. Maybe I'll find the script too.

BABUJI: Don't forget where you stand.

PROFESSOR: Behind you.

KUMAR: (*to Professor*) And I come after you. We have nothing to be afraid of. We are all behind Babuji. The Lord leads, the master and the pupil follow suit.

MEENA: But I am with Babuji. Not following him. My head rests in his lap.

BABUJI: Meena!

MEENA: Riding the magic horse.

PROFESSOR: Where will Ramu be?

KUMAR: The lowliest one. Behind everybody, at the tail end.

MEENA: The prince wlll confront the giant outside the castle.

KUMAR: Where has Ramu gone to? I hope the people outside won't create any trouble.

BABUJI: Don't be afraid. This room is our castle. We have to defend it with all our might.

PROFESSOR: The tradition and culture of the castle will have to be defended.

KUMAR: With our life and blood. We have to sacrifice our whole entity.

MEENA: I will sacrifice my chastity to defend the castle.

BABUJI: Mere talk won't do. Mere words are no substitute for power.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

PROFESSOR: (*from his notebook*) Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.

BABUJI: The fortress is endangered. We should think how best to defend the fortress.

(*All consider the situation. Suddenly, they become conscious of the paper bag.*)

PROFESSOR: What is in this packet?

MEENA: This is Shyam's gift for us.

KUMAR: Last month, in that bank hold-up, three masked men entered with a similar packet. They placed it on the counter and declared that the time bomb in the packet would explode in fifteen minutes. Within a minute, all the people cleared out in panic.

PROFESSOR: Later on, they found only a bouquet of flowers in the packet. But the dacoits escaped with the money.

BABUJI: Kumar, just open that packet.

(*Hesistantly Kumar goes to the packet, but lacking courage, returns.*)

KUMAR: A time bomb. I can hear it ticking.

(*All are silent. A tick tick can be heard, possibly from the wall clock*).

BABUJI: So, the time has come. No further delay in the plan of action.

PROFESSOR: (*still lost in thought*) I've got it. The defence of the fortress in three acts. The set—this very room and its furniture. With a few alterations here and there.

(*Shifts a sofa. Stops just in time from touching the the table with the packet on it.*)

BABUJI: Spell out your plan quickly.

PROFESSOR: The defence of the castle in three acts. In the first act, mere signs of external attack.

KUMAR: The noise outside is increasing.

PROFESSOR: Second Act—the Commander-in-chief turns traitor.

KUMAR: Ramu is the one missing now.

PROFESSOR: And in the final Act (*looks at all of them*) the destruction of this man in a very special manner.

BABUJI: How?

KUMAR: That's my responsibility. It is my duty to defend this castle.

BABUJI: The time has come. Talk less. Work more.

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

PROFESSOR: I need seven days for the script. We can name it. "The Last Frontier" or . . .

BABUJI: Not in seven days. Now. Right now.

KUMAR: I shall kill that traitor Ramu.

BABUJI: How much time do you need?

KUMAR: Not time, boss, money. Five thousand rupees.

PROFESSOR: I need that money. Five thousand for my script.

KUMAR: Just five thousand to eliminate Ramu.

MEENA: This will be done free.

PROFESSOR: My script is not available free.

KUMAR: Who will kill a man for nothing?

MEENA: I'll do it. By making love to Ramu.

KUMAR: This is no way to kill.

MEENA: When he begins to believe in my love and trusts me, I shall disclose all to him.

PROFESSOR: There is no climax in this.

MEENA: Ramu will die of desperate sorrow and five thousand rupees will be saved.

PROFESSOR: If you can kill with love, then you can do so with the pen also. The pen is mightier than the sword.

KUMAR: I read about a Chinese pen. It is really a pistol which looks like a pen. (*The Professor checks on his pen ; but is disappointed.*)

BABUJI: Now, we have three plans. First, Kumar's plan—to murder Ramu. Second, Meena's plan—to kill with love. Third, the Professor's plan—the destruction of Ramu through his writings. Now to prepare a master plan with a combination of all the three. (*Takes away the Professor's pen and gives it to Kumar. Kumar inspects it. Then holds it like a pistol Carefully, passes it on to Meena.*)

MEENA: (*dramatically turning it on the others*) Hands up! (*All put up their hands. Just as Meena turns, she finds Ram/Shyam standing before her. Ram/Shyam clad in khaki clothes. As though Ram/Shyam's personality has undergone a transformation. Meena drops the pen*) Shyam? (*to others, embarrassed*). Hands down.

(*All sit down, Meena goes up to Ram/Shyam and*

invites him to sit. Ram/Shyam remains unmoved. His conviction shines in his eyes.)'

BABUJI: We must resolve this situation. (*Kumar makes to move towards window ; Babuji stops him*).

RAM/SHYAM: It shall be resolved exactly at six p.m.

BABUJI: Yes, the moment of decision has arrived. Now for action. Plan number One.

KUMAR: Ram or Shyam. You really talk big. I am going to put an end to your nonsense. (*He is talking loudly, but is scared.*)

RAM: None will survive. Neither the buyers, nor the bought.

KUMAR: Come here (*he is shouting But the rebellious Ram/Shyam stands steady. Kumar hesitantly approaches him and raises his hand to give him a blow. Effortlessly, Ram/Shyam stops him. Kumar falls down.*)

BABUJI: Plan number Two.
(*Meena holds Shyam's hand*).

MEENA: Hero. A real hero. Shyam, you descended on Kurukshetra to annihilate the evil and protect the good. (*Ram/Shyam is unmoved. Meena goes to him*) You are my Shyam. I am your Meera. Lure me with the melodies of your flute.
(*She sings a Meera bhajan.*)

Bhaju mana charan kamal avinasi
Jetai deese dharan gagan beech
Tetai sab uthi dasi
Araj karoon abala kara jorey
Shyam tumhari dasi
Meera ke prabhu giridhara naagar
Kato jam ki phansi

You still cannot recognize your Meera? But I can comprehend you fully. You are Vishnu among the Adityas. Surya among the Jyotishkas. Mareechi among the Maruts. Chandrama among the Tarikas. You are Sam among the Vedas. Indra among the Devatas. Mana among the Indriyas. Chetna among the Jeevas. You are Shankara among Rudras. Pavak among Vasus. Meru among Parvats.

Parth Vrihaspati among Purodhas. Skand among Senanis. Samudra among Sarasis. You are Bhrigu among Rishis. Om among the Shabdas. Japa among the Yajnas. Himalaya among the Sthavaras. You are Vajra among Astras. You alone are Samay among Mapakas. Time among all measures.

RAM/SHYAM: Yes, I am Time. All-consuming Time. I shall destroy everything.

BABUJI: All-consuming Time? Time?

KUMAR: Time bomb. Judgement at six. It's ten to six now.

BABUJI: Plan number Three.

(*The Professor shrugs as he gets up. Asks Kumar for a cigarette. Kumar offers the packet of cigarettes, but on second thoughts, gives him only one. The Professor takes a dramatic posture beside Ram/Shyam.*)

PROFESSOR: Ram Babu. Shyam Babu. Come, let's complete the play.

(*Babuji goes inside.*)

RAM: What will the play be about?

PROFESSOR: I will demonstrate the importance of the laws of nature. If people do not play their allotted roles and if they exchange places, nature's balance will be destroyed. I shall compel acceptance of the prevailing situation. I will draw such examples that people will readily believe in their fates and meekly accept all injustice. Now, come on.

RAM/SHYAM: Now, I have nothing to say to anyone.

PROFESSOR: It does not matter. A writer has a perennial asset. That is his imagination. I will paint the character in such a way that all will detest him. You will be alienated. You do not comprehend my writing. It shall become a sharp-edged sword. It will shoot out fire. Every letter a spark. Every word a volcano. Sometimes, while writing, some characters overpower me. Like the snowman. At one time, he began toying with me. I escaped him soon, however, and put him on top of a peak. If I had wanted, I could have left him there. I controlled

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

his life and death. I hold the strings of my characters. I dictate them. I give them birth and life, and destroy them at will. I will destroy you completely. (*Babuji enters, clad as a common man—Charlie Chaplin? Puts an arm around Ram/Shyam's shoulder.*)

BABUJI: No, no one can harm Ram. He is my brother.

MEENA: Shyam is Ramu's brother.

BABUJI: Ram has many brothers. We are all Ram's brothers. Shyam is also my brother. Famine-stricken we had come to the city. Now, we will return to our village.

MEENA: All lies!

BABUJI: Together, we'll go down. To mingle with the masses. Come.
(*Ram/Shyam doesn't move.*)

RAM/SHYAM: I have to be present here at six o'clock.
(*All eyes on the packet.*)

KUMAR: Six to six.

BABUJI: No, we must go outside. (*To Ram/Shyam*) Come. (*Ram/Shyam stands rooted. To himself*) At six sharp. And only five minutes left. Inside, a time bomb. Outside the excited masses. (*goes in*).

MEENA: No one will escape. All will go up in flames; everything will be destroyed. All those who have no right to live, all those hirelings, all those mortgaged to money.

KUMAR: Sir, what will you do?

PROFESSOR: (*opening the notebook*) Maybe, a way can be found.

KUMAR: It's not that simple. You really have to search for it. Sir, what are you thinking? Should we remain here or go out?

PROFESSOR: Where would Babuji go?

KUMAR: He has already left, through the rear exit. Think of us now, sir.

PROFESSOR: There is nothing left to say now. The time has come. The play has ended.

KUMAR: No.

PROFESSOR: All actors now await the curtain call.

KUMAR: Sir, just three minutes more. This is no time for dramatics.

PROFESSOR: What gains? What losses? What memories? What lingering shadows of the past.

KUMAR: Sir, we must decide quickly.

PROFESSOR: Those with us and those left behind. Promises kept, promises unfulfilled. All that time snatched away.

KUMAR: Sir, please, not time, but the time bomb. *Professor snaps out of his trance*). Sir, please tell us what to do. Even Babuji has escaped.

(*Both are worried. Just then Babuji, in a military nniform Hitler ?—enters.*)

BABUJI: (*consulting watch*) Two minutes more.

KUMAR: Here, inevitable death. Outside, a pitched battle.

(*Babuji looks out of the window. His face is flushed with victory. Returns*)

BABUJI: Yes, this is my battle. They are all my soldiers. I am their General.

(*Kumar and the Professor take their position behind Babuji. All three march out. Meena rises. Will she follow them? No. She moves towards Ram/ Shyam and both sit down. As though they have arrived at a decision. On their faces pity and hatred for those who have gone. Sure of themselves and ready to face the future. As if waiting for six o'clock. Gradually, they fade into the dark. Just a ray of light on the packet. That too, slowly, dims out. Only the ticking of the clock. Curtain.*)

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

THE UNDERDOG—*A Play*

J. P. Das

In this play, as in life, the underdog dreams of his place in society and they all come forward—the elite, the intellectual and the leader—to help him, to uplift him. But when the critical moment arrives they desert him. It seems he has no deliverance until he can rescue himself.

The Underdog has been translated into several Indian languages and staged in different parts of the country.

Ravi Baswani, who has done the present translation, had directed it in its Hindi version staged in Delhi and had also played a role, that of the Professor.

J.P. DAS is a well known author, poet and playwright, who writes both in Oriya and in English. His publications in English include—*First Person, Love is a Season* and *Timescapes*, all collections of poems, and *Magic Deer* and *Forbidden Street* collections of short stories.

His plays have been translated into most Indian languages and have been staged in various cities all over the country, besides being adapted for radio and television. His plays in English translation are: *Before Sunset* and *Two Plays*. The former is regarded as a classic among modern Indian plays.

ISBN 0-7069-2582-3

Rs 35



VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD